

1.1 BACKGROUND

St. Lucie County, located in the heart of Florida's Treasure Coast, has experienced enormous change over the past decade. Historically, the area was a sleepy coastal county, where much of life was based on the agricultural economy and the tides of the lagoons and estuaries. The only center of population of any size was Fort Pierce, which served as the endpoint to the Florida cattle-herder's "Cracker Trail."

This rural character began shift in 1958, when the General Development Corporation (GDC) purchased over 40,000 acres in the County. The \$50 million project to create a new community on the North Fork of the St. Lucie River sparked a great deal of interest and land speculation. Full-page newspaper ads beckoned northerners to retire to St. Lucie County at low prices. The Corporation built their sales office at the corner of Prima Vista and US 1 to look like a Mississippi Riverboat, through which prospective buyers would pass by salesmen dressed to look like turn-of-the-century gamblers. Many of the lots were sold, but few were developed immediately; the City had only 330 people in 1970. But by 1980, this number had skyrocketed to over 17,000, and then to 88,769 by 2000.

The rapid growth of Port St. Lucie has had major effects on the County's demographics and quality of life. The United States Census Bureau estimated the County's population in 2005 to be 241,305, a 60.7% increase since 1990. This residential growth has not been met by job growth in the county necessitating many people to travel out of the area. This has spurred a distinct north-south commute. The growth has also not been met by new or upgraded infrastructure—the vast majority of the County lacks sidewalks, greenways, trails, and other amenities, but is experiencing heavy traffic congestion. Water quality and quantity has become a problem, and the environment is becoming increasingly stressed and under threat of degradation.

Despite rapid development, St. Lucie County is still a place of remarkable natural assets: Hutchinson Island has twenty-one miles of shoreline on the Atlantic Ocean; the Indian River Lagoon hosts some of the best fishing in the nation; much of the St. Lucie River is an aquatic buffer preserve and the Savannas is a unique ecosystem of freshwater marshes. These places, while threatened by adverse effects of growth, provide an opportunity to maintain a quality of life that attracted people to the County in the first place. Through greenways, bicycle, and pedestrian paths, St. Lucie County has the ability to create a network of linkages that can support continued—yet sustainable—growth.

1.2 PURPOSE OF THIS PLAN

Many different County policies and initiatives have informed the creation of this plan. First and foremost, this plan is intended to complement the County's Environmentally Significant Lands program and tie these vast natural resources together, connecting them to one another and to the urbanized parts of St. Lucie County. The County has also directed itself, through its Comprehensive Plan, to enhance its transportation system through bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure and to develop a master plan for these facilities. This Bicycle, Pedestrian, Greenways and Trails Master Plan represents the County's step to achieve that goal, following a Bicycle and Pedestrian Systems Analysis prepared for the St. Lucie Metropolitan Planning Organization. The Master Plan is designed to address the needs identified by that analysis and by public and stakeholder input and to develop a system that adds to St. Lucie County's recreational, transportation and natural amenities.

